

“A prayer for my daughter”

Critical appreciation

B.A.FINAL YEAR

ENGLISH LITERATURE

“A prayer of my daughter” is one of the most significant poems of William Butler Yeats. This poem was composed by the poet soon after the birth of his first daughter on 26 February, 1919. This poem was composed by Yeats soon after the composition of another significant poem ‘The second coming’. In that poem the poet said that the “ceremony of innocence is drowned”. But in this poem he speaks about innocence as the chief laurel of his daughter:

How but in custom and its ceremony

Are innocence and beauty born.

Yeats begin the poem with the image of his newly-beauty daughter sleeping calmly and peacefully in her cradle while a fierce storm rages outside. The intensity of the storm brings into the mind the idea that the world is about to come to an end:

Imagining in excited reverie

That the future years had come;

**Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.**

Then the poet speaks about what qualities he wants his daughter to possess. He wants that his daughter should be beautiful. But he hastens to add that he does not want her to be beautiful to the extent of making others distraught:

**May she be granted beauty and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught**

Then he wants that his daughter should learn courtesy:

**Hearts are not as gift but hearts are earned
By those that are not entirely beautiful.**

Then the poet gives examples of beautiful women of the world who have become foolish contemplating of their unearthly and divine beauty. He gives the examples of Helen of Troy and Venus, the goddess of love and beauty. While the first, because of her foolishness caused a war, the latter married a lamefooted ironsmith named Vulcan.

Then the poet wants that hatred should be banished from the heart of his daughter. Only in this way is the soul able to recover primal innocence, the innocence possessed by Eve before she ate the fruit of the forbidden tree:

**Considering that, all hatred driven hence,
The soul recovers redical innocence
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting
And that its own sweet will is heaven's will.**

Thus we find the poet praising courtesy, charm, wisdom and kindness as the chief attributes of a really beautiful woman. The idea is that beautiful women should not despoil the subjectivity of their nature "by politics of the objectivity or sacrifice the unity of their beings to cause outside themselves."

The poem is written in a lyric form containing ten stanzas with eight lines in each stanza. The poem follows a regular rhyme scheme, which is **AABBCDDC**. The meter of this poem alternates between iambic pentameter and trochaic pentameter, as in

**I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower.**

The poem is rich in the use of literary devices such as symbolism, personification, paradox, sibilance, assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia.

(1) **Paradox-** "murderous innocence of the sea"

- (2) **Sibilance**- “sea-wind scream,”
- (3) **Onomatopoeia**. “sea-wind scream,”
- (4) **Personification**- “future years.....dancing”, which implies the transience of life.
- (5) The poet uses symbols such as “sea wind” and “flooded stream” which denote turbulent forces at work.
- (6) **Alliteration**- “be granted beauty.”

W.B. Yeats was troubled and horrified about the postwar situation in the western world. There was change, chaos and turbulence in the society, and the world was becoming harsher and the course place to live in.

-Dr. Rajani Singh

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SYLVIA PLATH AS A FEMINIST POET

B.A. FINAL YEAR

ENGLISH LITERATURE

It is a well-known fact that Sylvia Plath, the great American poet, committed suicide at the age of thirty six leaving behind her two small children. She had suffered from depression since her early twenties and showed signs of considerable mental strain and instability throughout her later life. Plath's suicide was not the first time she had tried to end her life. That was at the age of twenty, following her very first descent into depression. Some of her psychological difficulties might have been because of the early death of her father, although a considerable amount of her difficulties came from her being a female.

Sylvia Plath was born at a time when the feminist movement was at the apex of women's rights movement all over the western world. Her poetry partly set the stage for the many experiments in consciousness that followed soon: it was comparable to, say, Malcolm X's militancy auguring the civil rights movement. Today after 50 years of academic assimilation. One finds little poetry that stands up well to Plath's urgent retort to patriarchy, militarism and domesticity.

Some critics believe that Sylvia Plath's disastrous marriage to poet Ted Hughes, and her subsequent suicide, make her an emblematic figure: A talented, ambitious woman whose over-investment in a patriarchal false consciousness led her to rely on marriage, children and domestic life as a means to attain self-worth. In the poems written after Hughes abandoned her, such as "The Applicant" and "Daddy", they see a librating, if self-immolating, rage: A final realization that the sacrifices she had made for Hughes and her obedience to patriarchal ideals of femininity and had not protected her, that she had been cheated in some fundamental ways. Others believe that this is an over-romanticized view of Plath's lifelong struggle with her mental illness, that it relies on a simplistic view of what was ultimately a deeply complicated relationship between two flawed people, and that it ultimately does little more than to glorify female self-destruction, which cannot be a feminist project. Plath portrayed Hughes in *Ariel* as her

oppressor and a man she loved in a macabre attempt to replace her father. She wrote in Daddy:

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do

Since her death, each generation of women has embraced Plath anew finding truth, inspiration and a unique female perspective in her writing. Her influence is more potent and powerful now than she could ever have imagined when she lay her head down to die that cold February morning:

I write only because

There is a voice within me

That will not be still

The novel, *The Bell Jar* and the various collections of his poems that appears during the next twenty years, secured for Plath the position of one of the most important women writers in the states. The mixture of comedic self-deprecation and forceful anger made her work a foreshadowing of the feminist writing that appeared in the later 1960s and the 1970s. Like Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, Plath's *Bell Jar* followed in 1965 with the posthumously published collection *Ariel*, was both a harbinger and an early voice of the women's movement. As the posthumous awarding of the 1920 Pulitzer Prize for poetry to Plath's collected poems showed, her audience was not limited to women readers, nor did her writing express only feminist sentiments.

Dr. RAJANI SINGH